
DIFFERENT CULTURAL LEVELS EAT HERE

Peter De Vries

Peter De Vries, one of the most highly acclaimed comic novelists in the United States, is known for his intimate observations of social reality. In this story, he brings the reader into a coffee shop to witness a conflict between a customer and a counterman. De Vries uses the situation in the coffee shop to explore common difficulties among members of different cultural groups in understanding and communicating with one another.

WHEN THE COUNTERMAN GLANCED UP FROM THE GRILL on which he was frying himself a hamburger and saw the two couples come in the door, he sized them up as people who had spent the evening at the theatre or the Horse Show or something like that, from their clothes. They were all about the same age—in their early forties, he decided, as they sat down on stools at the counter. Except for them, the place was empty. At least, the front was. Al Spain, the proprietor, was sitting out in the kitchen working on a ledger.

The counterman drew four glasses of water, stopping once to adjust the limp handkerchief around his neck. He had been whistling softly and without continuity when they entered, and he kept it up as he set the water glasses down.

“Well, what’s yours?” he asked, wiping his hands on his apron and beginning with the man on the end.

“Hamburger.”

“Mit or mitout?”

The man paused in the act of fishing a cigarette out of a package and glanced up. He was a rather good-looking fellow with dark circles under his eyes that, together with the general aspect of his face, gave him a sort of charred look. “Mit,” he said at length.

The counterman moved down. “And yours?” he asked the woman who was next.

“I’ll have a hamburger, too.”

“Mit or mitout?”

The second woman, who had a gardenia pinned in her hair, leaned to

her escort and started to whisper something about "a character," audibly, it happened, for the counterman paused and turned to look at her. Her escort jogged her with the side of his knee, and then she noticed the counterman watching her and stopped, smiling uneasily. The counterman looked at her a moment longer, then turned back to the other woman. "I'm sorry I didn't get that," he said. "Was that mit or mitout?"

She coughed into her fist and moved her bag pointlessly on the counter. "Mit," she said.

"That's two mits," the counterman said, and moved on down to the next one, the woman with the gardenia. "And yours?"

She folded her fingers on the counter and leaned toward him. "And what would we come here for except a hamburger?" She smiled sociably, showing a set of long, brilliant teeth.

"Mit or mitout?" he asked flatly.

She wriggled forward on the stool and smiled again. "May I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Why do you say 'mit or mitout'?" Her escort jogged her again with his knee, this time more sharply.

The counterman turned around and picked up a lighted cigarette he had left lying on the ledge of the pastry case.

He took a deep inhale, ground the butt out underfoot, and blew out the smoke. "To find out the customer's wish," he said. "And now, how did you want it?"

"I think mitout," she said. "I like onions, but they don't like me."

"And yours?" he asked the remaining man.

"I'll have a hamburger, too," the man said. He fixed his eyes on a box of matches in his hands, as though steeling himself.

"Mit or mitout?"

The man fished studiously in the matchbox. "Mitout."

The four watched the counterman in complete silence as he took the hamburger patties from a refrigerator and set them to frying on the grill. They all wanted coffee, and he served it now. After slicing open four buns, he returned to his own sandwich. He put the meat in a bun and folded it closed, the others watching him as though witnessing an act of legerdemain. Conscious of their collective gaze, he turned his head, and scattered their looks in various directions. Just then the phone rang. The counterman set his sandwich down and walked past the four customers to answer it. He paused with his hand on the receiver a moment, finished chewing, swallowed, and picked up the phone.

"Al's," he announced, his elbows on the cigarette counter. "Oh, hello, Charlie," he said brightening, and straightened up. "How many? . . . Well, that's a little steep right now. I can let you have half of that, is all. . . . O. K., shoot. . . . That's nine mits and three mitouts, right?. . . Check. . . . That'll be O.K." He consulted the clock overhead. "Send the kid over then. So long."

He hung up and was on his way back to the grill when he became aware that the woman with the gardenia was whispering to her escort again. He stopped, and stood in front of her with his hands on his hips. "I beg your pardon, but what was that remark, lady?"

"Nothing."

"You passed a remark about me, if I'm not mistaken. What was it?"

"I just said you were wonderful."

"I was what?"

"Wonderful."

"That's what I thought." He went back to the hamburgers, which needed attention.

As he turned them in silence, the woman regarded him doubtfully. "What's the matter?" she asked at last, ignoring the nudging from her friends on either side.

The counterman's attention remained stonily fixed on his work.

"Is something wrong?" the woman asked.

The counterman lowered the flame, stopping to check it, and straightened up. "Maybe," he said, not looking at her.

She looked at her friends with a gesture of appeal. "But what?"

"Maybe I'm sore."

"What are you sore about?" the woman's escort asked. "She only said you were wonderful."

"I know what that means in her book."

"What?"

The counterman turned around and faced them. "We have a woman comes in here," he said, "who everything's wonderful to, too. She's got a dog she clips. When she hits a cab driver without teeth who doesn't know any streets and you got to show him how to get to where you want to go, he's wonderful. Fellow with a cap with earlaps come in here with some kind of a bird in his pocket one night when she was here. He had a coat on but no shirt and he sung tunes. *He* was wonderful. Everything is wonderful, till I can't stand to hear her talk to whoever she's with any more. This lady reminds me a lot of her. I got a picture of *her* all right going home and telling somebody I'm wonderful."

“But by wonderful she means to pay you a——”

“I know what wonderful means. You don’t have to tell me. Saloons full of old junk, they’re wonderful, old guys that stick cigar butts in their pipe——”

“The lady didn’t mean any harm.”

“Well . . .”

There was a moment of silence, and the charred-looking man signaled the others to let well enough—or bad enough, whichever it was—alone, but the other man was impelled to complete the conciliation. “I see perfectly well what you mean,” he said. “But she meant not all of us stand out with a sort of—well, trademark.”

The counterman seemed to bristle. “Meaning what?”

“Why, the way you say ‘mit or mitout,’ I guess,” the man said, looking for confirmation to the woman, who nodded brightly.

The counterman squinted at him. “What about it?”

“Nothing, nothing at all. I just say I suppose it’s sort of your trademark.”

“Now, cut it out,” the counterman said, taking a step closer. “Or you’ll have a trademark. And when you get up tomorrow morning, you’ll look a darn side more wonderful than anybody *she* ever saw.”

The charred-looking man brought his hand down on the counter. “Oh, for Pete’s sake, let’s cut this out! Let’s eat if we’re going to eat, and get out of here.”

“That suits me, bud,” said the counterman.

The commotion brought Al Spain from the kitchen. “What seems to be the trouble?” he asked, stepping around to the customers’ side of the counter.

“She said I was wonderful,” the counterman said, pointing. “And I don’t see that I have to take it from people just because they’re customers, Al.”

“Maybe she didn’t mean any harm by it,” the proprietor said.

“It’s the way she said it. The way that type says it. I know. You know. We get ‘em in here. You know what they think’s wonderful, don’t you?”

“Well,” Al said, scratching his head and looking at the floor.

“Hack drivers that recite poems they wrote while they cart fares around, saloons full of old——”

“Are we going through that again?” the charred-looking man broke in. He stood up. “Let’s just go,” he said to his friends.

“We’ll go into this quietly,” Al said, and removed a toothpick from his mouth and dropped it on the floor. “We’re intelligent human beings,” he

continued, with an edge of interrogation, looking at the others, who gave little nods of agreement. He sat down on one of the stools. "Now, the thing is this. This man is fine." He waved at the counterman, who stood looking modestly down at the grill. "He's a great fellow. But he's sensitive. By that I mean he gets along fine with the public—people who come in here from day to day, you understand. Has a pleasant way of passing the time of day, and a nice line of gab, *but*—different cultural levels eat here, and he doesn't like people that he thinks they're coming in here with the idea they're slumming. Now don't get me wrong," he went on when the woman with the gardenia started to say something. "I like all types of people and I'm tickled to death to have them come in here, you understand. I'm just saying that's his attitude. Some things set his back up, because he's like I say, sensitive." He crossed his legs. "Let's go into this thing like intelligent human beings a little farther. What prompted you to pass the remark—namely, he's wonderful?"

The charred-looking man groaned. "Oh, for Pete's sake, let's get——"

"Shut up, Paul," the woman with the gardenia said. She returned her attention to the proprietor. "It was just—oh, it all starts to sound so silly. I mean it was a perfectly insignificant remark. It's the way he says 'mit or mitout.'"

Al was silent a moment. "That's all?" he asked, regarding her curiously.

"Yes."

"It's just a habit of his. A way he's got." Al looked from her to the counterman and back again.

"You see," she said, "it's making something out of nothing. It's the way he says it. It's so—so offhand-like and—well, the offhand way he evidently keeps saying it. It's so—marvelous."

"I see. Well, it's just a sort of habit of his." Al was studying her with mounting interest.

"Of course, we're sorry if we've offended him," said the woman's escort.

"We'll let it go that way," the counterman said.

"Fine! We'll say no more about it," Al said, gesturing covertly to the counterman to serve up the sandwiches. "Come again any time," he added, and went back to the kitchen.

The two couples composed themselves and ate. The counterman went and leaned on the cigarette case, over a newspaper. The door opened and a small man in a tight gray suit came in and sat down, pushed his hat back, drew a newspaper out of his pocket, and spread it on the counter. The counterman dropped his, drew a glass of water, and set it before the customer.

"What'll it be?"

"Two hamburgers."

The two couples stopped eating and looked up, and there was a blank silence for a moment. Then they bent over their food, eating busily and stirring their coffee with an excessive clatter of spoons. Suddenly the clink of cutlery subsided and there was dead silence again. The counter-
man wiped his hands on his apron, turned, and walked to the refrigerator. He opened it, took out two patties, set them on the grill, and peeled off the paper on them. He sliced the buns and set them in readiness on a plate. Standing there waiting for the meat to fry, he cleared his throat and said, looking out the window at something in the street, "Onion with these?"

"No. Plain," the customer said, without raising his head from the paper and turning a page.

The two couples hurried through their sandwiches and coffee, crumpled their paper napkins, and rose together. One of the men paid, left a dollar tip on the counter, turned, and herded the others through the door, following them himself and closing the door rapidly and quietly. The counter-
man shoved the cash register shut and went back to the grill without looking at them or glancing through the window as they unlocked their car at the curb, got in, and drove off. He served the man his sandwiches. Then he came around the counter and sat on a stool with the paper.

The door flew open and a big fellow in a bright checked shirt came in, grinning. "Hello, paesan!"¹ the newcomer said. "Loafing as usual, eh?"

The counterman jumped off the stool and held out his hand. "Louie! When did you get back?"

"Yesterday."

"For heavens sake!" The counterman went back behind the counter. "Glad to see you."

"Glad to see you, too, you lazy son of a gun."

"How many, Louie?"

"I'm starved. Fry me up three."

"Mit or mitout?"

"Mit!"

FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. What does the woman wearing the gardenia mean when she calls the counterman "wonderful"? What characteristics of the counterman elicit the woman's remark?

1. *paesan* (pī' zôn), countryman (Italian).

2. Do you think the counterman has reason to be angry? Do you think he is paranoid? How do you characterize his reaction? Explain.

3. If you were the counterman, what would you say or do to express your feelings to the woman?

I'LL CRACK YOUR HEAD KOTSUN

FROM *ALL I ASKING FOR IS MY BODY*

Milton Murayama

Milton Murayama was raised in Hawaii, where a wide variety of ethnic and socioeconomic groups coexist. In this story of two friends from different socioeconomic backgrounds, Kiyoshi, the main character, is from a family of Japanese heritage. His friend Makot is also of Japanese heritage, but his is the only Japanese family in a Filipino neighborhood. Friction between Kiyoshi and his parents develops as his parents interfere with his friendship with Makot. In the middle of an argument about Kiyoshi's visits to Makot's house, Kiyoshi's father threatens, "I'll crack your head kotsun." Kotsun does not mean anything in Japanese. As the story explains, "it's just the sound of something hard hitting your head."

THERE WAS SOMETHING FUNNY ABOUT MAKOT. He always played with guys younger than he and the big guys his own age always made fun of him. His family was the only Japanese family in Filipino camp and his father didn't seem to do anything but ride around in his brand-new Ford Model T. But Makot always had money to spend and the young kids liked him.

During the summer in Pepelau, Hawaii, the whole town spends the whole day at the beach. We go there early in the morning, then walk home for lunch, often in our trunks, then go back for more spearing fish, surfing, or just plain swimming, depending on the tide, and stay there till sunset. At night there were the movies for those who had the money and the Buddhist Bon dances and dance practices. The only change in dress was that at night we wore Japanese *zori* and in the day bare feet. Nobody owned shoes in Pepelau.

In August Makot became our gang leader. We were all at the beach and it was on a Wednesday when there was a matinee, and Makot said, "Come on, I'll take you all to the movies," and Mit, Skats, and I became his gang